FALLING STARS:
AN EXAMINATION OF STAR ATHLETE SEXUAL ASSAULT
CASES AND THE PUBLIC RELATIONS CRISIS
RESPONSE STRATEGIES UTILIZED BY THEIR TEAMS
A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction ........................................ Pg. 4

Chapter 2: Literature Review ................................... Pg. 9
  Branding and Image Management ............................... Pg. 9
  Pro Sports Leagues Taking the Branding Initiative .......... Pg. 12
  Uniting with Fans Through Off-the-Field Measures .......... Pg. 14
  Connecting Branding & Corporate Responsibility with Star Athletes Pg. 17
  Crisis Communication Response Strategy ..................... Pg. 20
  Purpose of Research ........................................... Pg. 22

Chapter 3: Methodology ......................................... Pg. 23
  Content Analysis ............................................... Pg. 23

Chapter 4: Introduction of Athletes ........................... Pg. 29
  Ben Roethlisberger ............................................. Pg. 29
  Kobe Bryant ...................................................... Pg. 32
  Johan Santana .................................................... Pg. 35

Chapter 5: Results ............................................... Pg. 38
  Frequencies ....................................................... Pg. 38
  Time the Article was Written/PR Response Crosstab .... Pg. 41
  Name of Athlete/All Questions Crosstab ..................... Pg. 43
# Table of Contents Cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fan Feedback/Time When the Article was Written Crosstab</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan Feedback/PR Responses Crosstab</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaches Response/Teammate Response &amp; Offending Athlete Response Crosstab</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offending Athlete Response/Lawyer &amp; Agent Response/Commissioner Response Crosstab</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front Office Response/Team (Coach, Teammate &amp; Offending Athlete) Response Crosstab</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>League Office &amp; Commissioner/Organizational PR Responses Crosstab</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Discussion</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations to the Study</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question Analysis</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix - Codebook</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Professional team sports in America have taken on a new identity in the twenty-first century. Although professional sports were always popular, at times individual sports such as boxing, golf and horse racing ruled the sporting landscape in America. Stars from The Roaring Twenties such as Jack Dempsey, Bobby Jones, and Bill Tilden captivated the nation. Simultaneously, team sport stars like Babe Ruth and Red Grange more than made their impact on sports and culture. While Ruth became a symbol for America’s Pastime, Grange made his mark initially on the collegiate ranks, which helped college football to become one of the more popular genres of athletics. With Major League Baseball serving as the backbone for American team sports, the rise of the National Football League after its merger with the American Football League in 1970 raised professional football’s profile in this country and solidified professional team sports’ place in this country. By the 1980’s, professional basketball began to emerge behind the star-power and intensity of the Magic Johnson vs. Larry Bird rivalry. Ultimately, Michael Jordan’s athletic achievements and popularity took the game to new heights. Meanwhile, ice hockey clung to its traditions and extremely loyal fan base and
saw a great deal of expansion in its own right from the Original Six in the 1940s, to eventually a thirty team league.

By the 1990’s, the four major team sports (baseball, football, hockey and basketball) rounded into collective shape, and fans began to turn to their athletic heroes for entertainment on a daily basis. Though individual superstars had garnered celebrity status since the days of Ruth, the juxtaposition of the success of individual athletes against the evolution of modern media has positioned professional athletes on a unique pedestal in American culture today.

Public relations in American professional team sports has grown with the leagues themselves. One landmark instance of crisis management within sports took place in 1919, when members of the Chicago White Sox baseball team were found to have intentionally lost the World Series. The board of commissioners acted swiftly in an effort to retain the integrity of the sport in the eyes of the public. They elected former judge Keneshaw Mountain Landis as baseball’s first acting commissioner. Landis decided to banish the guilty parties from Chicago (know historically as the “Black Sox”) for their role in the fix.

Around this same time, Babe Ruth’s popularity began to skyrocket. As Ruth and his New York Yankees dominated the 1920s, his off-the-field escapades reached urban legend status. However, “The Bambino” was never criticized heavily by the media or the public for his rambunctious lifestyle. In fact, little image management, if any was needed by the Yankees organization. The media either put a light-hearted spin on Ruth’s transgressions, or omitted them altogether from the papers. At that time, writers and
athletes traveled together on trains and formed lifelong friendships and journalists were also aware of the contributions Ruth was making to the game of baseball. Therefore they took it upon themselves to add fluff to his off-the-field stories (Adomites & Wisnia, 1995).

As time wore on, professional team sports, and the business of sport began to evolve with society. Twenty-four hour sports news outlets came into existence; athletes could be regularly seen as spokesmen for products and shortly thereafter, sport was no longer just a recreational activity, it was big business. Initially, professional teams had become more than just a group of guys representing a city, as they had become corporations worth hundreds of millions of dollars (and in some cases worth more than one billion dollars). Before long, teams and the athletes themselves had become multi-million dollar industries. Lucrative player contracts and endorsements are evidence of this phenomenon. These days, stories of Babe Ruth’s social life could be the lead story on “Sportscenter,” much like we’ve seen with stars such as Tiger Woods. With investments like these on the line and with the high visibility of athletes, crisis management may continue to play a pivotal role in professional team sports.

Statistics show that athletes, particularly basketball and football players nowadays are hardly model citizens. This issue is becoming more relevant now and is a concern for the future as 40 arrests involving NFL and NBA players have taken place between January 1st and August 31st 2010, and the statistics suggests that college athletes in these sports are committing crimes at an even higher rate (Benedict, 2010). This fact could be troublesome for the professional leagues of which many of these athletes hope to
eventually compete in. Ironically, athletes are often portrayed as role models in commercials and by the leagues in which they play; yet it is not uncommon for them to appear in the police blotter. It is also not uncommon for athletes to find themselves in the commissioner’s office or falling out of favor with their coaches. These issues are nearly a daily occurrence in professional sports today, and it is the public relations practitioners from each team who are there reestablish a positive image of both the athletes and the organization.

This raises the point that now it is commonplace for not only each individual league to have a public relations department, but each team to have a public relations department as well. It is the responsibility of these practitioners to provide information about a negative occurrence should one arise, act as the liaison between the team and the media, and to make sure the public thinks as favorably as possible about their team at all times. This can be extremely challenging because fans can develop a strong rapport with their teams. Brand equity, created by years of fan loyalty and an establishment of team ideals, causes fans to create an idea of what they think the team should stand for. The addition and subtraction of players via free agency and trades can send mixed signals about a team’s commitment to certain values. A team jettisoning a popular player for a more productive one with a checkered past could potentially alienate some fans. The same is true for teams that part ways with popular athletes strictly for economic reasons.

Public relations practitioners must be cognizant of these issues when they approach a public relations crisis. The types of strategies used (such as the timing, response and organization member selected addresses the situation), the rationale behind
them, and any other factors that contributed to the practitioner’s decision on their approach should be further explored.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Public relations practitioners have become an intricate part of most business; professional sports appears to be no different. When one considers the amount of stadiums and arenas that are sold out all across the country every weekend, the enormous contracts that are given to professional athletes and the money spent on advertising, professional sports, like all business, needs to make sure their assets are seen as favorably as possible. This is one reason why public relations is a necessity for sports. Image and brand management are two factors that heavily influence the public’s perspective or attitude toward an organization, business or professional sports team.

Branding and Image Management

Brand images impact organizations and their publics. Some organizations react to their reputations based on the public’s opinion of them. Therefore, image building is a constant process, and the relationship between those organizations and their publics is very symmetrical (Avenarius, 1993). Funk and Gladden (2002) stated, “Sport managers are beginning to view their teams, leagues, and properties as ‘brands’ to be managed.
Examination of the popular coverage of the sport business reveals numerous instances of sport entities being treated as brands.” The mission for many sport organizations is to cultivate the type of consumer who is aware of much of the news relating to the team they support. Consumers who know statistics about the team and view their games regularly are considered to be people who would have a strong and favorable attitude toward a particular team (Funk and Gladden, 2002).

The importance of brand management in professional sports cannot be overstated. Funk and Gladden (2002) said, “If a sport consumer were given reason to not trust a particular sport organization or an organization’s employees, the brand associations with that organization would be negative. In an era when world championship teams trade or fail to re-sign key players, a new sense of distrust has been generated toward professional sport franchises.” Player movement can influence branding as well. In the event of a public relations problem, a team simply removing a player can have a profound impact on the team. Therefore, making intelligent decisions when dealing with players in this manner could potentially be critical to the image of the team. Rapid player transactions (trades, free agency, etc) by itself can contribute to decreased fan loyalty. This concept often plays itself out in many sports. Shaquille O’Neal left the Orlando Magic for the Los Angeles Lakers via free agency in the summer of 1996. Around the same time, the Chicago White Sox traded away many of their best pitchers. In both instances, fan loyalty eroded after these players left town. Gladden, Irwin & Sutton chronicled the backlash of those personnel decisions and continued:

The key for professional teams will be to differentiate their brand by developing and/or strengthening positive associations with team brands in
the minds of their consumers…The challenge for sports teams will be to identify the core values that the organization wants to promote and to communicate them throughout the organization and to current and prospective consumers…As teams pay more attention to their brand’s core values, the personnel side of the business will be impacted. For example, if a team brand is focusing on families, then the team will avoid signing or trading for players that have poor personal reputations. While winning is important, doing so at the expense of contradicting a key brand association is poor brand management practice. Thus, look for brand management efforts to impact the personnel side of professional teams of the future (2001).

With regard to correctly branding a team or organization, having players that reflect the team’s core values is paramount. Symbolic and non-product related needs of fans are vital to the success of the organization from a public relations standpoint.

Many feel that brand image is also enhanced by attributes such as team success and the perceived image of the coaching staff. Bauer, Stockburger-Sauer and Exler (2008) with help from Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt (2004), concluded: “The effect of the non-product related attributes on benefits is almost triple that of product-related benefits (e.g., the team, star player, head coach, play, success). This might be of greater importance to fans. This result is consistent, however, with previous research on brand associations in team sport (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2004). Because most of the fans have a long fan history, they have all experienced ups and downs of their team such as player and coach changes, for example. Perhaps for that reason contextual factors (i.e., the stadium atmosphere, other fans, club history and tradition) have greater relevance to them.” It is challenging to discriminate between psychological commitment and brand attitudes when gauging fan loyalty. The purchase habits of team merchandise can also be used as an indicator of fan loyalty (Bauer, Stockburger-Sauer and Exler, 2008). It is
more beneficial for sports teams and other organizations to employ depth brand image strategies as opposed to breadth brand image tactics (Roth, 1992).

Pro Sports Leagues Taking the Branding Initiative

Having established the associations between professional sports fans and brand/image management, it is helpful for the field to explore at what types of public relations strategies are currently being done in the world of sports. Each sports league has taken steps to craft the right image for its league, its teams and players. Cause-related sport marketing is a form of image management that is being introduced by not just individual teams, but entire leagues as well. Cause-related sport marketing is also linked with the concept of co-branding, which according to Keller (1998) occurs when multiple products are united and or are marketed together. Gladden and Lachowetz (2003) researched this concept of image strategy in regards to the National Football League and the National Basketball Association:

A goal of the NBA Read to Achieve program could be to have consumers feel good about attending NBA games, wearing merchandise because of their involvement with a particular cause, thus adding meaning and value (i.e. creating a benefit) to the consuming of a specific product. Similarly, the NBA’s association with a cause could enhance the image of the type of person that follows the NBA... Beyond the NBA Read to Achieve Program, the National Football League has a long-standing association with the United Way (a national system of 1,400 community-based volunteer programs working to improve people’s lives), Major League Baseball (MLB) has also created a reading program in conjunction with American Library Association, and the National Hockey League’s “Hockey Fights Cancer” strives to create opportunities to fund cancer research. Additionally, teams and players have their own cause-related sport marketing initiatives in place. For example, the Boston Red Sox have long worked with Jimmy Fund to create opportunities to promote and raise money for adult/child cancer research through the Dana Farber Cancer Research Institute (p. 318-320).
The National Basketball Association has done extensive public relations work driven by initiatives from the league office. Fortunato (2000) researched members of the National Basketball Association, including interviewing NBA Commissioner David Stern and other public relations directors from around the NBA. Fortunato said: “Stern credited the NBA players for their role in the promotion of the NBA, stating ‘Our players reinforced the NBA through their own appearances in commercials, our players reinforced the NBA by being on “Seinfeld” or “ER” or “Friends” or “Murphy Brown,” going on “Letterman” or “Leno” or “Arsenio Hall” or “Conan O’Brien.” There is a self-perpetuating machine here that is extraordinary.’” Fortunato’s case study noted that the NBA’s public relations and promotional ideas were created by the league itself. This is no doubt a method headed by Stern, who has been commissioner since 1984.

John Mertz, public relations director of the New Jersey Nets, talked about the comfort players have with the PR department of their respective teams. Mertz said in an interview with Fortunato:

They know our role-what we are there for and they use us as shelter or protection as they want to turn down or schedule. Some of them [media members] will go to guys for something separate, but usually the players are good at telling us they are doing it or after the media outlet has gone to the player and asked, they will come back to us and say we spoke to Jayson [former Nets center Jayson Williams] and he said he will do this for us. There is nobody out there who feels the need to circumvent our PR department because we turn them down consistently (2000).

Chris Brienza, who works in the NBA’s media relations department, talked with Fortunato about framing stories for the benefit of the NBA and its players:

An active [role], helping present our players and our teams and our coaches in the most positive light possible and being able to explain
issues, being able to set up interview requests, being able to help people who cover the game…the teams’ public relations directors are the people who deal with the players on a day-to-day basis and a lot of times communication is easier and more effective if you work with public relations director because they have a daily relationship with that player (2000).

Bryan McIntyre, NBA senior vice president of communication discussed how the personnel within the NBA league office are very aware of the importance of their role as agenda-setters for the league and extremely proactive in this endeavor in terms of providing access to the NBA players and coaches. “That is why it is very important for us to try to foster the relationships between the players and the media so the fans can get the ultimate word” (Fortunato, 2000).

Uniting with Fans Through Off-the-Field Measures

Gladden and Lachowetz noted the necessary conditions for a successful cause-related sport marketing (CRSM) program. A CRSM program must include organizational commitment, a tangible exchange between organizations (for example, the Dallas Mavericks of the NBA can raise money for a youth basketball organization, this also makes more sense for the Mavericks than it would for the team to raise money for the arts) and sponsors and effective promotion. The results of a successful program will include an enhanced brand image and brand loyalty. “Corporations, sport leagues, teams events and athletes can capitalize on cause-related sport marketing programs to enhance their brands while simultaneously making a contribution to society,” (Gladden and Lachowetz, 2003). Building a rapport with the public is also crucial to having a successful cause-related sport marketing campaign. The more people can effectively connect with the organization’s campaign, the better off the organization will be at
increasing brand loyalty. Arnold (2001) noted that Corporate Moral Responsibility (CMR) programs can increase the integrity of a corporation’s brand, and Hoeffier and Keller (2002) suggest CMR programs can increase a brand’s credibility, which includes its trustworthiness. Conversely, “Clark and Gladden (2002) suggested that mistrust of professional sport organizations has led to decreased consumption of a professional sport product,” (Gladden and Lachowetz, 2003).

According to experts, values between sports teams and their fans must be in concert if lengthy relationships are to prosper. Gladden, Irwin & Sutton, (2001) state: “A main challenge to maintaining consistency for the sport team is the disasters that occur in the form of unexpected losing seasons, player misconduct and injuries, and coaching changes. The pro team will often react to such problems by amending its marketing communications in an effort to reduce the fallout from the problem. Instead of being reactive, pro teams will become more proactive.” One method of combating these problems is for players and coaches to interact with fans who attend their games, buy their merchandise and support their product regularly. Featuring players and coaches at post game autograph sessions, special season ticket holder events and community service projects are ways to create this atmosphere. Unfortunately, this doesn’t happen often enough as according to Burton (1999), “Central to the enhanced interactions found in user groups will be the ability of team marketers to involve players and coaches in these efforts. Today, given the ever-heightening media scrutiny associated with these figures’ celebrity, there is very little interaction between fans and players and coaches. Out of the necessity to build relationships in an effort to build brand equity, team managers will
seek to alter this trend.” Gladden, Irwin & Sutton (2001) added: “Professional teams of this decade will focus on developing positive mental associations with their team brands as a means of fostering long term loyalty. As such, we suggest that teams will focus on the ease with which positive brand associations with a particular team can be created given a consumer’s willingness and desire to belong to a particular group.”

One proven branding method is for sports teams to engage in socially responsible behavior. According to Walker and Kent (2009):

Athletes from individual sports could be examined using a strategic orientation. Over 400 public charities and private foundations connected to professional athletes and teams currently exist, distributing more than $100 million dollars annually to not-for-profit groups and other initiatives (Babiak et al., 2007). Future research could examine the link between the individual athletes’ charity and their connection to the larger organization/team. For example, a team may wish to support the athletes’ cause due of the strategic benefits that may accrue from the publicity given to such a high profile community figure and the obvious link to the organization (p. 763).

Walker and Kent also noted, “that sport fans (like most individuals) will tend seek out positive information about elements that they endorse and may be dismissive of information that is contradictory to existing positive feelings. For example, highly identified game attendees may look for the socially responsible activities of teams to reinforce their fanship [sic]; however, those activities that contradict those positive feelings (e.g., socially irresponsible actions) will be quickly dismissed. This psychological phenomenon referring to the discomfort felt at a discrepancy between what you already know or believe, and new information or interpretation is referred to as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).” The uniqueness of sports puts sport managers and public relations practitioners of these teams in an interesting position. “While many
companies communicate the ‘good’ things they are doing, consumer skepticism of
corporate communication is high, making these communications of suspect value. Sport
teams, on the other hand, are often viewed in high regard within their local community,
and through CSR programs and social sponsorship they can further enhance their stature
in the community” (Walker and Kent, 2009).

In addition, Walker and Kent discovered that respondents of their study did not
simply care about winning and losing when creating an opinion of a team’s reputation.
“These nonproduct dimensions become particularly important for those fans possessing
lower levels of team identification, and for those times when the team is having a losing
or subpar season.” Walker and Kent ultimately found “the examination of a consumer-
level framework linking corporate social responsibility to organizational evaluations and
patronage intentions revealed a general positivity in sport consumers’ responses. This
finding is consistent with previous literature that underscored the extent to which
attitudes about organizational corporate social responsibility initiatives impacted
consumers’ positive brand/product evaluations and subsequent intentions.” It appears
corporate social responsibility (or lack thereof) can augment or potentially damage
relationships with consumers.

**Connecting Branding and Corporate Responsibility with Star Athletes**

The traditional business world has been familiar with many of these issues, trends
and concepts; however, some are uniquely sports specific. These concepts stress a
connection with fans, intelligent marketing centered around the socially positive aspects
of the team and popular player personnel decisions. The level of responsibility
exemplified by specific athletes and teams can directly influence all of these issues. Funk and Gladden (2002) stated that having star athletes present on a team is one of the four product related attributes in professional sports (product related attributes being attributes that are seen as the components necessary for performing the function(s) expected by consumers- in this case, factors that contribute to the performance of the team). Funk and Gladden went on to reference Schofield (1983), Gotthelf (1999), King (1998, 1999) and Fisher & Wakefield (1998) when writing, “the presence of a star player(s) on a team can contribute to the overall attractiveness of a given team (Schofield, 1983). Attendance increases have recently been attributed to star players in both U.S. professional baseball and basketball (Gotthelf, 1999; King, 1998, 1999). Particularly in the case of teams that are unsuccessful, marketing or promoting star players may help counteract negative brand associations developed through losing (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998).”

Walker and Kent (2009) conducted extensive research on corporate social responsibility and other ethical concerns in sports. They found that much of the attitudes consumers take towards professional sports leagues and their teams stems from the actions of the star players. They concluded: “Sport industry corporate social responsibility differs from other contexts as this industry possesses many attributes distinct from those found in other business segments. For example, the ‘star power’ of the athletes, the connections sport teams have to the local communities, and the level of affect displayed by its many consumers distinguish the sport industry from most others, and may provide interesting and new perspectives for the study of corporate social responsibility.”
Similarly, Babiak and Wolfe (2009) claimed that individual athletes are the most important part to building up the relationship with the consumer. They offer several methods as to how teams can position players as positive role models in society while citing works from Kern and Irwin:

Professional sport leagues (e.g., National Hockey League (NHL), National Basketball Association (NBA)), corporations (e.g., Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, Palace Sport and Entertainment), teams (e.g., Toronto Maple Leafs, Toronto Rock, Detroit Pistons, and Detroit Shock), and athletes (e.g., Curtis Joseph, Chauncey Billups) are influential agents in our society when considered from both economic and cultural perspectives (Kern, 2000). Due to the importance of developing and maintaining good relations with the communities in which they operate, the above mentioned entities often turn to community outreach activities to build good-will among salient stakeholders (e.g., local businesses, public policy makers, members of the community). These activities take a multitude of forms, including programs where coaches and/or athletes contribute time to particular causes and/or financial donations to causes, often via the formation of charitable foundations (Irwin et al., 2003) (p. 719-720).

Babiak and Wolfe (2009) continue to chronicle some to the public relations problems that have plagued professional sports in recent years:

In addition, off the court/field behavior of a team’s employees (i.e., players) also, invariably, becomes open knowledge (Armey, 2004). Organizations in other industries typically do not face the same type of scrutiny of their business practices or of their employees’ behaviors. For instance, if an employee of a manufacturing firm engages in immoral or illegal behavior, few will ever hear of it. On the other hand, if there is a parallel situation with an athlete or coach, it often leads to a media frenzy (e.g., Tank Johnson violating probation (Kider, 2007), Michael Vick’s involvement in dog fighting (Schmidt & Battista, 2007), Pacman Jones’s off-field issues (Saraceno, 2007)). Sport organizations, thus, may engage in CSR activities as insurance against negative reactions to such occurrences before the fact (Godfrey, 2005), or as an effort to improve their image after the fact. The latter was the case with the NFL when it worked with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals on public service announcements and programs to help educate players and the public on treating animals properly after it was brought to
light that one of the NFL’s star players (Michael Vick) had engaged in dog fighting (Battista, 2007) (p. 722-723).

Oats and Polumbaum (2004) also discussed the crisis management issue facing Los Angeles Lakers star Kobe Bryant some five years ago. Bryant was dropped as a spokesperson for Coca-Cola/Sprite and McDonalds following his arrest on charges of sexual assault. The Los Angeles Daily News stated his commercials were pulled before he was even formally charged (Notebook: Tennessee Takes a Shot at Patterson, 2003). With his image tarnished, companies who had used Kobe to market their products no longer felt he was appropriate to represent their organizations. These multi-million dollar companies divorced themselves with not only Bryant, but the NBA as well. Players must be aware of the effect they have at all times. According to Nowell, “Players need to understand their role as ambassadors-- they need to be consumer friendly” (Hopwood, 2005).

Crisis Communication Response Strategy

Having understood the importance a star athlete can have in relation to brand management and corporate social responsibility, grasping the significance of defending these brands and athletes can provide a better overall understanding of brand management. When an athlete makes a mistake that threatens the integrity of their team’s brand, it is necessary for the team to intercede to restrict negative response. Crisis communication can greatly effective the means of accomplishing that end.

Crisis communication theory has focused on the organization rejecting the crisis or accepting responsibility and accommodating the victim. Crisis response contains three
goals: to form the attributions of the crisis, to alter an organization’s perceptions within a crisis and to reduce the negative affect of a crisis. Practitioners can seek to accomplish any of these goals when responding to a crisis (Coombs, 1995).

Coombs’ (2006) took a cluster approach to categorizing crisis response. First, the deny method is utilized when an organization seeks to separate itself from any involvement with the crisis. This act of framing the crisis can reveal itself in the form of attacking an accuser, shifting blame for the incident, or through a flat out refutation of the crisis. When attempting to diminish the crisis, practitioners typically either justify or excuse the action that led to a crisis. This approach tries to minimize the association with the crisis, and therefore soften the blow and the amount of perceived responsibility. The organization can also attempt to repair its relationship with their publics by dealing with the crisis. Dealing can be observed through expressing concern, regret or compassion; offering an apology or corrective action; or by bolstering and supporting the accused party by reminiscing on past good deeds.

Organizations can additionally use a fourth strategy. When avoiding comment altogether, an organization has effectively used the silence tactic. However silence inherently carries a stigma along with it. Silence is seen as being passive in nature, which suggests that an organization is not only lacking control of a situation, but is also not trying to adequately acquire control of a situation (Hearit, 1994). Silence also creates a delay in response, which can result in other negative effects. Coombs (2011) said of a delayed response, “If the crisis team does not supply the initial crisis information to the media, some other groups will, and they may be ill informed, misinformed, or motivated
to harm the organization.” Professional sports teams have the ability to use any of these tactics when a star athlete is faced with a crisis. If properly used, they could potentially assist teams with their quest to build and maintain brand equity, while preserving the reputation of being a responsible organization that is concerned with the opinions of their fans.

**Purpose of Research/Research Questions**

Despite finding information on the relationship of public relations and professional sports, there seems to be no specific crisis communication action administered by teams when a star athlete gets into trouble. Having an established plan for the discipline could be beneficial for practitioners and professional sports teams, regardless of the sport and would be the next step in the evolving world of sport public relations. The following questions are proposed: 1) Is there a specific type of crisis communication strategy put into practice by professional sports teams, organizations and leagues when a star athlete is accused of sexual assault? 2) Do these strategies in any way impact the image of the athlete or the team in the eyes of their fans? 3) Can one begin to formulate a best practice crisis communication plan for sports PR practitioners based on those results (for this specific type of crisis)?
Chapter 3: Methodology

Content Analysis

The goal of this study was to discover any existing public relations practices utilized by professional sports teams who have undergone this crisis, and to seek out any potential impact these practices have had on the athlete’s image, and fan support. A content analysis of three separate sexual assault cases from the world of sports was conducted to achieve this goal.

This study focused on three specific star athletes who have been accused of sexual assault in recent years: Kobe Bryant, Ben Roethlisberger and Johan Santana. Given that these athletes compete in three separate leagues and sports, the teams these athletes play for (the Los Angeles Lakers, the Pittsburgh Steelers and the New York Mets respectively) all approached these crises differently.

Content for this analysis was retrieved from two newspapers from each of their local markets. The Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Daily News, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Pittsburgh Tribune Review, New York Times and New York Daily News were
examined for articles relating to the sexual assault case for each of the corresponding athletes. A Lexus-Nexus database search for “‘athlete’s name’ sexual assault” was used to obtain articles (Note: Due to the fact that the LA Times did not yield any results through Lexus-Nexus, the same search was conducted using a Pro-Quest database). All articles that were returned via the search within the first thirty days of the first reporting of the incident were analyzed. In addition, articles beginning from the thirtieth day after the story broke that specifically referenced the pending case and the athlete’s perceived image, and or referencing any newly utilized public relations strategies were included in the study within a six-month window.

The content analysis consisted of a series of questions first breaking down each case by athlete, sport, newspaper source, and the time in which the article was written (classified as either “during” or “after”). Questions pertaining to any reference of the athlete’s image or the team’s image, along with the presence and breadth of fan feedback was included. Using Coombs’ 2006 model of crisis response strategy (deny, diminish, deal and silence), the study will possessed questions pertaining to the presence and type of crisis communication strategy exercised by the team’s owner, public relations department, front office, attorneys, coaches and teammates; the league office and commissioner; and the offending athlete and their legal team. The presence of these public relations strategies included any attempt at contacting the league, organization or athlete that resulted in a “silent” response. Finally, ancillary questions citing any reference of the athlete’s race, personal life, the team’s potential financial loss or usage of
social media were measured. A complete sample codebook can be found in the appendix section.

By using a content analysis of newspaper articles in each athlete’s hometown, each specific case was magnified. The beat writers and columnists who observe each athlete and team provided a perspective on each crisis situation through a lens that readers in each market can identify with. Unlike the national media, these publications have vested interest in the people within each of these communities, and therefore, spoke more directly to the fans of these athletes and their teams. Because of their proximity to the situation, fans openly expressed opinions on the athlete, both during and after the crisis, and offered more insight on the case and changes in the images of the athlete and the team. The individuals who authored the articles used in this study also possessed a rapport with the teams and their media relations departments. The representatives of the offending athletes and their teams who addressed the public are more likely to speak candidly to members of the media they trust; these are media people that they interact with on a daily basis. These are the same individuals who observed firsthand any public relations tactic, or change in protocol when the organization or athlete does address the media regarding the crisis. Additionally, some newspapers may hold an agenda that causes writers to approach stories from a certain point of view. Thus, two newspapers from each city was used to vary the vantage point in each case.

This quantitative approach provided a detailed summary of the crisis response strategies used by four different facets: the organization, the team, the offending athlete and the league. The organization is operationalized as the owner, the front office, the
public relations department and team attorneys that are on retainer. The team is recognized as any teammates or coaches who were reached for comment. The athlete involved in the crisis often addressed the media himself, along with their personal representation (lawyers, agents or personal PR team), and the league is seen as each sport’s public relations official(s) and the commissioner. Any connection between these four entities revealing a consistent public relations approach or message was explored, along with any similarities across the three different cases and sports.

In order to effectively supplement this quantitative research, a series of qualitative quotes and statements from the articles that were analyzed unearthing specific strategies used in each case was included in the results and discussion sections. This helped to provide a more accurate portrait of the team, league, athlete and organizational approach to handling these sexual assault crises. They also assisted in explaining why some tactics were and were not used.

In all, 272 articles were examined in this study. The content of each article was coded on a thirty-nine question codesheet. Given the six month window of which relevant articles were allowed to be included and the fact that each article pertaining to the case within the first month was utilized, the extensiveness of this study offers a considerable sample of crisis communication tactics in sports. The use three different cases gives a more complete view of how crisis communication is used in each of the sports present in this study. The possibility of coaches, players, leagues and organizations handling these situations differently is something that must be accounted for, and therefore was made a part of the research. The number of articles with references to the applicable team was
calculated to see the frequency of affiliation within each case. The dynamic of race is also notable in this particular study, for each of the three athletes examined are of differing ethnic backgrounds. An inquiry of any racial references or remarks on how that may influence public relations messages presented by the organization, the league or the team was incorporated.

The advent of social media technology in recent years has empowered athletes and given them a vehicle to communicate directly with their fans. However this is not just limited to the athletes, as professional teams and leagues now have their own official Facebook and Twitter accounts they frequently use to communicate with fans. It was appropriate to investigate whether or not athletes, organizations, teams and leagues had fully embraced this paradigm shift and had begun using social media as a primary mechanism for communicating with publics.

While the questions pertaining to the presence of and type of crisis response strategy used are extremely relevant, equally relevant is the extent to which these methods impacted fans and the image of both the athlete, and the team. Therefore, questions about any reference to the athlete’s and the team’s image were present, along with questions about the type of feedback provided by fans only in the city in which the athlete plays. This gave a glimpse into whether or not the crisis communication methods used had any affect on the fan’s opinion of the athlete and the team. Some articles either included, or were exclusively fan replies to articles previously written relating to the sexual assault cases. Of the articles featuring multiple story replies, some touched on several past articles that happened to include the athlete’s case. Under these conditions,
only articles that included at least three fan responses to the athlete’s case were counted as relevant to the study.

Both the opinion of fans and the public relations strategies used could hinge on athlete’s image prior to the incident. For this reason, a question about any reference to the athlete’s personal life was added, as this can weigh heavily on fans who feel the athlete may not only be guilty of committing a crime, but also embarrassing their family or committing an unfaithful act against their spouse.

The financial implications of a crisis facing a star athlete the magnitude of Roethlisberger, Santana and Bryant could be felt by the team, and to a lesser extent, the league. Any significant financial loss noted in the articles analyzed was also included, as it could be an indirect reflection of fan feedback, if for instance, a substantial decrease in ticket and jersey sales is noted.

The results of this study were imputed into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (or SPSS) for a statistical analysis of frequencies and patterns across various codesheet questions. Comparative data was classified as statistically significant when the 2-sided asymptotic significance was less than .05.
Before engaging in a study of the sexual assault cases facing Kobe Bryant, Ben Roethlisberger and Johan Santana, it is important to understand the background of these athletes and the teams they represent. Though each of these athletes are among the best in their respective sports, their road to stardom and the circumstances surrounding each of their allegations are all very different. Each of their stories most likely contributed to their popularity and positive standing within the public eye. It is also worth noting the teams and cities in which each of these athletes play. Bryant and Roethlisberger have played their entire careers for two franchises that are among the most successful in all of professional sports.

Ben Roethlisberger

In a city known for its rugged citizens and sturdy Midwestern values, the Steelers of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania have etched themselves in the minds of many football fans as the epitome of class in the National Football League. The Steelers organizational stability and progressive mindset has been implemented over the course of several decades by The
Rooney Family, who have owned the team since the team’s inaugural season in 1933. Today, chairman emeritus Dan Rooney serves as the United States Ambassador to Ireland. He is also credited for developing the NFL’s mandate that all teams in search of a head coach or general manager interview at least one minority candidate. This came to be known as the “Rooney Rule,” (Garber, 2007).

In 2004, the Steelers drafted quarterback Ben Roethlisberger in the first round. A native of another Midwest town, Lima, Ohio, Roethlisberger attended Miami University in Oxford, OH and was a three year starter amassing over 10,000 passing yards and 80 touchdowns. As a rookie, Roethlisberger set an NFL record (concluding the following season) by winning the first 15 starts of his career as a starting quarterback and would eventually be named NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year. Ben was also helping out the Pittsburgh community by attending charity golf outings and hosting a football summer camp in the Pittsburgh area. His foundation also donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to K-9 agencies in Pittsburgh (Silver, 2010a). Roethlisberger’s meteoric rise would only continue, as he would guide the Steelers to a Super Bowl championship in 2006. Later, he would win a second Super Bowl championship for Pittsburgh in 2009, however after each triumph in football’s biggest game, Roethlisberger fell upon trying times that hampered his status within the Pittsburgh community.

Ben Roethlisberger suffered serious injuries in a motorcycle accident in the summer following the 2005-06 season. He was without a valid motorcycle license and a helmet at the time of the accident. Although he overcame his injuries and did not miss any games due to the accident the following season, Roethlisberger’s recklessness and
apparent lack of concern for his personal safety rubbed some people the wrong way (though riding with a helmet was not required by state law). The day after being released from the hospital, Roethlisberger released a statement through the Steelers apologizing to his family, fans, teammates and the Steelers organization while saying the next time he rides, he would wear a helmet (Big Ben Apologizes, Pledges He'll Ride Wearing Helmet, 2006).

In July 2009, after winning his second Super Bowl championship, a 31-year-old woman claimed the Steeler forced himself on her at a celebrity golf tournament in Lake Tahoe. The alleged victim filed a civil suit seeking at least $440,000. Due to a lack of evidence, no criminal charges filed, however the civil suit has yet to be resolved. In a sworn affidavit, a former co-worker of the accuser claimed she boasted about having consensual sex with, and one day getting pregnant by Roethlisberger (Fuoco, 2009).

Due to the fact that the lack of evidence resulted in a minimal public relations response from Roethlisberger and the Steelers, this initial sexual assault accusation towards Roethlisberger was not included in this study. However, the impact of this accusation, as well as his motorcycle accident should be taken into account when reviewing the crisis communication approaches used by Roethlisberger, the Steelers and the NFL.

A sexual assault accusation against Ben Roethlisberger surfaced for the second time in an eight month span on March 5, 2010. The quarterback was with teammate Willie Colon in Milledgeville, Ga. when during bar hopping excursion, he allegedly assaulted a 20-year-old student in a bathroom. After bringing the woman and her friends
to the V.I.P. section of the bar, Roethlisberger encouraged them to consume numerous shots of alcohol. According to the accuser, he then led her to the restroom where Roethlisberger made his move, and the woman’s friends were blocked by Roethlisberger’s bodyguard (an off-duty police officer) when they attempted to intervene. The alleged victim went to the hospital and reported the incident. Although a rape kit was collected at the scene, abuse was not determined due to a lack of DNA evidence.

Kobe Bryant

The son of former NBA player Joe “Jellybean” Bryant, Kobe Bean Bryant came into the NBA in 1996 with a higher pedigree and knowledge of the professional basketball lifestyle than the average player. Bypassing college and going straight to the NBA draft after attending Lower Merion High School in Philadelphia, expectations for Bryant were lofty as the Lakers traded for him days after the Charlotte Hornets drafted him. Bryant did not disappoint as he teamed with Shaquille O’Neal and coach Phil Jackson to lead the Lakers to an NBA championship in just his fourth season. Bryant would be a key cog in two more Laker championships in 2001 and 2002.

Few athletes in the NBA, if not any American team sport, had experienced the levels of success as Bryant by 2003: three NBA championships, five All-Star appearances, twice an All-NBA First Team and Second Team member, twice a member of the All-Defensive First Team, one time All-Star MVP and a Slam Dunk Contest Champion. These achievements had allowed Bryant to attain superstar status, and had paved the way for multiple endorsement deals, television cameos and an attempted career as a rapper, all by the age of 24.
On June 30, 2003, while staying in an Edwards, Colorado (near Eagle, CO) hotel in preparation for a surgical procedure on his knee the following day, Bryant allegedly raped a 19-year-old hotel employee in his room. The woman, who works as a concierge and receptionist, went with her parents to the Eagle County Sheriff’s Department to file a complaint against Bryant the next day. An arrest warrant for Bryant was issued three days later by the sheriff’s department. This came as somewhat of a surprise to Bryant and his legal team, as his attorneys claimed that Eagle County authorities said no arrest warrant or criminal charges would be filed against Bryant until July 7. However Eagle County Sherriff Joseph Hoy obtained a warrant from a district judge without authorization from Eagle County District Attorney Mark Hurlbert. This uncommon approach was taken despite Bryant’s cooperation; he was interviewed by a sheriff’s investigator under oath the day the complaint was lodged, and willingly provided DNA samples to police. Speculation began to swirl that the young, newly appointed District Attorney Hurlbert, and the overzealous Sherriff Hoy, were simply out to apprehend a superstar defendant, rather than following the proper procedure in this type of investigation (Modesti, 2003).

Bryant’s marketability was extraordinary. His clean-cut, family oriented image (Bryant was married with one daughter in the summer of 2003) was the one that companies felt they could latch onto. In 2001, he was named Sports Business Daily’s most marketable athlete. Unlike many athletes, Bryant had never had any scrapes with the law, which made his accusation of sexual assault in the summer of 2003 surprising to the sports world. This was especially shocking to the Lakers, an organization that had won more NBA championships than any other franchise other than the Boston Celtics. In
a city whose culture is largely ruled by celebrities and entertainment, the stars of the
Lakers have the ability to captivate the sports fan base, without the impediment of
football. The movie stars in Hollywood garner much of the attention, and many of those
same movie stars, like Jack Nicholson, revere the Lakers. Bryant’s celebrity status was
cemented in Los Angeles. All of that was jeopardized by Bryant’s arrest and subsequent
public relations predicament.

The Los Angeles Lakers, owned by Dr. Jerry Buss, are one of the more decorated
franchises in American professional team sports. The Lakers have won 16 NBA
Championships and have advanced to the championship round 31 times. Considering the
Lakers success and popularity, the organization has managed to avoid major public
relations mistakes. One of their more noteworthy PR events took place when star point
guard Earvin “Magic” Johnson announced he was HIV positive in the fall of 1991 and
retired from basketball. At the time, little was known about HIV and its long term
ramifications. Over time, rumors about Johnson’s promiscuousness and sexual
orientation began to circulate (Fumento, 1992). However Johnson, the Lakers and the
NBA used various measures to raise HIV awareness and to educate the public on HIV
prevention. Johnson has spoken at HIV/AIDS awareness events sponsored by the United
Nations and The Magic Johnson Foundation was created in 1991 to combat HIV and
AIDS. This past season, the NBA, through their NBA Cares program, partnered with
Greater Than AIDS, in an effort to limit the negativity associated with the disease. The
NBA also instituted a league-wide recognition of World AIDS Day (NBA Encourages
Fans to Unite in Fight on World AIDS Day, 2010).
Like many Major League Baseball players, Johan Santana started playing baseball at a young age in Venezuela. Santana made his major league debut with the Minnesota Twins in 2000, and by 2004 he had established himself as an elite pitcher. Although Santana has never won a championship like Roethlisberger and Bryant, his individual career accomplishments placed him amongst the very best of his contemporaries. Santana won two American League Cy Young Awards, a Gold Glove Award and was a four-time All-Star all during his time with the Twins. In 2009, one year after joining the New York Mets, he was named to Sports Illustrated’s Major League Baseball All-Decade Team.

Santana is a husband and a father of three, and has participated in various community service endeavors. The Johan Santana Foundation was founded in the pitcher’s hometown of Tovar and purchased bats and gloves to children in the area. It also provided local hospitals with assistance. Santana also purchased a fire truck for the city and has hosted toy drives and concerts there. He also hosted charity bowling events while a member of the Minnesota Twins and the New York Mets.

Santana successfully provided the public with an image of an athlete that was not only a quality pitcher, but also a quality person. Like Bryant, his accusation of sexual assault that became public on June 23, 2010 created some dissonance in the minds of sports fans. A woman came forward and claimed that Santana sexually assaulted her in October of 2009 on a Florida golf course. The woman claimed the two were walking along a path next to the course when he forced himself on her. However, no charges were ever filed, as the Sherriff’s Office in Lee County, FL ruled that although intercourse had
taken place, a lack of consent could not be verified. It was later revealed that Santana admitted to investigators that he had consensual sex with the woman (Raissman, 2010).

Aside from the Santana incident, the New York Mets have recently dealt with other public relations challenges. Shortly after the Santana incident came to light, an incident involving Mets closer Francisco Rodriguez and his girlfriend’s father took place. After Rodriguez and his girlfriend got into an argument, a physical altercation ensued between Rodriguez and his girlfriend’s father resulting in the pitcher punching the 53-year-old man and ramming his head into a wall. The proximity of this fight to the Mets clubhouse made this episode truly unique. At the time of the incident, it received more media coverage in the New York Times and the New York Daily News than the Santana incident did, however the Mets were quiet when asked about this matter (Bondy, 2010).

A year earlier, the Mets found themselves in a financial bind, the repercussions of which are still being felt today. The team is principally owned by Fred Wilpon; his son Jeff is currently the Chief Operation Officer. Though the exact figures varied in according to different accounts, in 2009 it was reported that the Wilpon family lost $700 million in the Bernard Madoff scheme (Johnson et al., 2009). This resulted in a law suit filed by Irving Picard in the interest of the Madoff victims seeking $1 billion in damages. The subsequent legal costs associated with sorting out the matter reportedly caused the Mets to sell a minority stake in the franchise to David Einhorn of the hedge fund Greenlight Capital in 2011 (Coffey, O’Keeffe and Thompson, 2011).

All three of the sexual assault allegations were dismissed; Kobe Bryant’s was the only case that went to trial. The prosecution, due to a lack of evidence, was unable to
prove the alleged victims did not provide consent. Understanding the background of each athlete, team and sexual assault accusation can assist with comprehension of the research and results. Further conclusions will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.
Chapter 5: Results

**Frequencies**

Initially the most noticeable of statistic coming from the frequencies of the data was the complete lack of total articles surrounding the Johan Santana accusation. While the Bryant and Roethlisberger crises each accounted for roughly 46% of the data, the Santana case only made up 8.1% of all the articles used in this study. Despite the vast circulations of the New York Daily News and the New York Times, the lack of coverage of the Santana story as compared to the Roethlisberger and Bryant stories were substantial.

Overall, there was a near even split of articles based on the time in which the stories were written. The first 30 days worth of articles accounted for 54.8% of the 272 total articles, leaving 45.2% of the articles written in the following five months. The potential impact of the public relations strategies used by the teams involved will be uncovered throughout the crosstab examination.
The majority of articles included in this study did not primarily deal around the image of the athlete or their teams. Although the number of references to the image or character of the athlete and or team was not largely prevalent, references were present. Though only 13.2% of the articles mentioned the athlete’s character or image in its headline, 35.7% called the athlete’s image into question somewhere in the story. This total was nearly 23% higher than the amount of team references present in the study (12.9%). References to the personal lives of the accused athletes appeared in just under 28% of the articles studied and the author of the article suggested a public relations strategy for the troubled athlete in only 11% of total articles.

The presence of fan feedback was even less than that of references to image and personal life. Fan reaction was present in 18% of articles. Interestingly, the measure of fan feedback was basically equal: 6.6% of fan feedback was positive, 6.3% was negative, and 4% had both positive and negative feedback. A deeper understanding of the fan feedback can be realized when compared with other aspects of the report.

Responses from the Steelers, Mets, and Lakers organizations were present in 25.7% of newspaper articles. This meaning that either the public relations department, the front office (team president, general manager etc.) or ownership was reached or was attempted to be reached in a quarter of all articles. Within the organizations, the front office spoke publically more frequently than either the owners or the public relations department. The front office addressed the media 19.5% of the time, as compared to 14% and 7% by owners and PR departments. In terms of crisis communication strategies, the organizations only used “deal” and “silence” approach; “deny” and “diminish” were
completely absent from the organizational plan. Owners and front office representatives “dealt” with their crisis slightly more (about 1% in each instance) than they used the “silence” approach. Within the organization, only the PR Department used “silence” more than “deal,” however the PR department seldom was responsible for comment.

Looking at the team methods, the presence of teammates of the accused athletes responding to the sexual assault cases were barely greater than that of coaches. Coaches responded in 17.3% of articles, mostly using the “deal” style of response, 8.5% (of all articles). However coaches also responded by using response methods that could not be categorized, and therefore were coded as “cannot tell” 5.1% of the time. Teammates on the other hand, responded 18% of the time, using the “deal” method by far the most often, 11.8% of all articles.

A considerable increase in presence of a response by the offending athlete is seen in the frequency analysis. The athlete accused of sexual assault spoke to the media in 31.3% of all articles. A more even distribution of strategy is noticeable as well: “deny” 11.4%, “deal” 10.3%, “silence” 5.9% and “cannot tell” 3.7%. The “diminish” response strategy was never used by the athlete. The athlete’s lawyers, personal PR staff & agents (one category) responded in about 1/5 of the articles. They almost exclusively used the “deny” tactic, 14.7% of the time. The next highest method was “cannot tell” at 2.9%. Though the accused athletes allowed their attorneys and agents to often speak on their behalf, the teams virtually never had their own legal representation involved. The team attorney was not present or was not attempted to be reached for comment 99.6% of the time.
Major League Baseball, the National Football League, and the National Basketball Association’s league office responded in 5.9% of articles in the study. The league commissioners, Bud Selig, Roger Goodell and David Stern respectively, commented in just over 15% of articles. In spite of the league offices not using a definitive response strategy, the commissioners used the “deal” response 12.9% of all articles, easily the most.

There was a drastic lack of appearances of some categories in certain questions in the study. Although the team name was present in just under 92% of articles, there was practically never any instance of the team offering its contact information, or an opportunity to be reached by the media in the future. Also, there is absolutely no use of social media present in this study. The prominence of social media as it is seen today was negligible by comparison in 2003, when the Kobe Bryant case took place. However the Santana and Roethlisberger crises each took place within the last two years, yet the leagues, the teams and the athletes themselves did not take to social media to address their situations. In spite of the fact that each athlete is from a different racial group, the subject of race was only referenced in ten of the total articles, and as a result had no influence on the data. Similarly, only nine articles referred to any potential financial loss the team could receive due to the crisis, most of which were in reference the contracts signed by the athlete’s, rather than a drop in ticket and merchandise sales or net worth.

Time the Article was Written/PR Response Crosstab

There were several significant takeaways from the information yielded by this crosstab. The owners of the teams not only spoke more frequently about each case after
the incident, they also increased their willingness to “deal” with each crisis after the incident, as opposed to “silence,” which was used far more often during the incident. Similarly, the front office used the “deal” approach only five times during the incident and seventeen after, and in contrast, used “silence” seventeen times during and only twice after the incident. However unlike owners, the front offices and PR departments spoke about the sexual assault accusations at about the same rate during and after the incident.

The relationship between incident timing and the coach’s response was also significant. The presence of coach’s remarks regarding the sexual assault accusation in all three cases was seen nearly twice as often after the incident. They also tended to use the “deal” method far more often after the incident, fifteen times as opposed to eight during. While coaches did not use the “diminish” strategy during the incident, they did use it three times afterwards. The teammate’s response was also significant, as they addressed the case only twelve times during the incident, but thirty-seven times afterwards. Of the 32 times teammates “dealt” with the situation, 26 of them took place after the incident. This was by far the most of any response strategy.

The accused athletes were willing to speak on the matter during the incident, 37 times, however they spoke more often after the fact, 48 times. More notable was their usage of PR responses: athletes used the “deny” strategy 26 times during the incident, 21 times more than the next highest strategy, and used “deal,” 25 times, and “silence,” eleven times, after the incident. When the athlete’s lawyers and agents spoke on their behalf, which was during the incident over 90% of the time, they almost always used the “deny” technique, 39 of a possible 49 times. Furthermore, commissioners spoke to the
crisis over twice as many times after, and almost exclusively used the “deal” approach, 35 of 41 times. All of the preceding relationships were statistically significant.

**Name of Athlete/All Questions Crosstab**

Though not statistically significant, the fact that the Ben Roethlisberger case received nearly the exact same amount of media coverage, 63 to 61, during and after the incident is noteworthy. The Bryant and Santana cases each received a distinctly greater amount of coverage during the incident.

The first significant relationship is seen in the reference of the team image. The Pittsburgh Steelers team image was mentioned by far the most in this study, 26 of 35 total references. The New York Mets, on the other hand, received only two of those references. Yet the individual images of Bryant, 46, and Roethlisberger, 47, was referenced nearly an identical number of times. Consequently, the latter was not a significant relationship, however the increase in Kobe Bryant’s personal image references compared to his team image references is notable. Still, there was a significant connection between the athlete and references to their personal lives. Bryant overshadowed Santana and Roethlisberger in this category as his case garnered 55 of a possible 76 references. With the LA Daily News being responsible for 29 references and the LA Times containing 26 references, the Los Angeles publications each carried their own weight in acknowledging Kobe Bryant’s family, specifically his wife and infant daughter. All of the nine references received by Johan Santana came from the New York Daily News.
Another significant rapport existed between the athlete and the article suggesting a public relations position or action. Roethlisberger received 24 of 30 possible references. These references were distributed evenly between the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and the Pittsburgh Tribune Review, 11 and 13 respectively. Rather than offering free public relations advice for Roethlisberger, John Richards (2010) of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette advised the Steelers franchise to cut ties with the quarterback in the early stages of the case’s development.

While Kobe Bryant did not receive an incredibly larger amount of fan remarks and feedback, he did possess the most positive fan remarks by a wide margin, receiving 15 of the 18 total positive comments received by the three athletes. Fans cheered loudly for Bryant in his first exhibition game of the 2003-04 season, and they showed support for Bryant by his mere appearance on the bench during a previous exhibition game (Dilbeck, 2003). Kobe even received a standing ovation when he arrived in the middle of a game versus the Denver Nuggets; Kobe went on to make the game-winning shot as time expired (Beck, 2003c). Around the same time, it was estimated that Bryant was third in overall all-star votes (voted on by the fans), and first in the Western Conference (Beck, 2003a).

Santana and Roethlisberger each received four more negative fan responses than positive (Santana receiving zero positive fan remarks) and Roethlisberger claimed the most articles featuring both positive and negative fan feedback. Santana was even boo’d by fans during his first start after the accusation became public (Ackert, 2010). Fans did not have a much patience for the pitcher, who did not perform well in that start.
Organizational statements were yet another category that was dominated by one athlete and was statistically significant. Over 70% of the organizational statements made in the articles examined were from Roethlisberger’s Pittsburgh Steelers. This trend was even more noticeable when looking specifically at the owners, as Fred Wilpon of the Mets was only reached or was attempted to be reached once and declined to comment, and Dr. Jerry Buss of the Lakers did not comment to the media at all regarding Kobe Bryant (Ackert, Botte and Rubin, 2010). Art Rooney used a combination of “deal” and “silence” to handle the Roethlisberger situation. The Steelers also controlled the PR department and front office presence. Of the 19 possible responses by the team public relations departments, 13 were made by the Steelers (three each from the Mets and Lakers) and the 39 of 53 front office statements were made in response to the Roethlisberger case (10 for Bryant and 4 for Santana). When looking at the response strategies used by the front offices of each team, the Mets exclusively used “silence,” while the Lakers elected to “deal” 60% of the time. The Steelers however had a relatively even combination of “deal,” 16, “silence,” 13, and “cannot tell,” 10.

Phil Jackson, head coach of the Lakers, and Mike Tomlin, head coach of the Steelers spoke to their athlete’s crises more than Jerry Manuel, former manager of the Mets, however Manuel spoke in a higher percentage of articles, 27%, than did Jackson, 17%, or Tomlin, 16%. Though this was not statistically significant, the response strategies used by coaches was. Of responses that could be clearly categorized, Manuel only took the “silence” approach. Jackson preferred to use “deal” most often, however he was the only coach to attempt to “diminish” the case. Tomlin “dealt” with the situation by
far the most. Teammates took a similar approach, as Lakers and Steelers used the “deal” technique 32 times. The Mets players did not use that approach once, yet they did use silence the most, slightly more than diminish.

Statements made by Kobe Bryant were most visible in the content analysis. His 45 articles with responses exceeded that of Roethlisberger, 29, and Santana, 11. Not only was this connection significant, but the approach the individual athletes used was as well. Bryant held 29 of the 31 “deny” responses, Roethlisberger claimed 23 of the 28 total “deal” responses, and Santana had the highest usage of “silence,” 6 of 16.

Roethlisberger, through his personal public relations/legal team, granted TV interviews with two local news stations “after” the incident had taken place at his family’s Pennsylvania farmhouse. In those interviews, he appeared contrite, and although he did not discuss the legal matters around his case, he did admit that “Big Ben” was a creation caused by his arrival in the big city of Pittsburgh. He claimed he had gotten away from the Christian beliefs he was raised with; he used to write Biblical references on his cleats before games (Rotstein, 2010). Bryant similarly made more references to his faith after the incident than ever before and even tattooed a psalm on his arm, a reaction that observed by Howard Beck (2003d) of the LA Daily News.

Johan Santana’s six responses accounted for over 50% of his total response strategies. Santana’s lawyers never addressed the issue through the media in this study. However Roethlisberger and Bryant frequently had their legal team speak on their behalf. They used the “deny” approach be far the most, 40 times combined, of 54 possible responses.
As discussed previously, Roger Goodell and the NFL spoke in reference to the Roethlisberger situation far more than the other leagues and their commissioners. The NFL tended to “deal” more, however “cannot tell” was measured as the highest response amongst the three leagues. This was not a significant relationship, however Goodell using the “deal” approach 34 of the 35 total responses, was significant.

**Fan Feedback/Time When the Article was Written Crosstab**

Though not statistically significant, this crosstab presented a visible discrepancy in fan responses when juxtaposed to the article’s timing. During an incident, fans provided the most negative feedback with eleven negative responses. However after the incident, fans provided thirteen positive responses, the highest of any response type in that time span. The number of positive responses during and negative responses after were practically inverted, and the articles featuring both or indifferent responses were nearly identical at each time. There was a clear increase in overall presence of fan responses after the incident, as fan feedback was present in 17% of articles during, and 23% of articles after.

An article from the LA Daily News references how fans were happy to see Kobe Bryant himself “finally” release a statement (Kredell, 2003). This implies that fans thought Kobe may have waited too long, though he made his initial statement within two weeks after the story broke, “during” the crisis.
Fan Feedback/PR Responses Crosstab

A steady increase of articles containing both fan remarks and statements from each entity within the organization and team was observed. In articles containing fan feedback, there were one, two, four, eight, eleven and seventeen responses for owners, PR departments, front offices, coaches, teammates and the accused athletes respectively. Legal teams, commissioners and the leagues had three each. In each case where fan response was present, “deal” was the most consistently used approach and the highest total. It was the one strategy used by an owner, was tied for the most frequently used strategy within in PR departments and front offices, and was used the most by coaches and teammates. The accused athletes however had the highest total for “cannot tell,” seven, with “deal,” six, being the second most used response strategy. The accused athletes possessed a significant relationship within this category. The breakdown is as follows: the seven “cannot tell” responses consisted of four positive, two negative and 1 article containing both; the six “deal” responses split evenly between positive and negative fan remarks; the three “deny” approaches were all found in articles with negative responses; positive fan feedback was present in the one article where the athlete used “silence.” Overall, there was a fan feedback split with the athlete’s response strategies yielding eight positive and negative apiece, with one article including both.

Coaches Response/Teammate Response & Offending Athlete Response Crosstab

Statements present in the same article by both coaches and teammates occurred nineteen times. “Dealing” with the issue was the most frequently used response technique by teammates, accounting for 32 of the 49 possible teammate responses. Regardless of
the presence of a coach’s statement in the same article, teammates used the “deal” approach most often. However, teammates used this method a higher percentage of the time, 77%, when no statement from the coaching staff was present in the article, than when coaches spoke in the same article, 47%. Interestingly, the same occurrence took place when the parties were reversed. Coaches “dealt” with the crisis at a higher rate, 57% of the time, when no teammate response was in the same article, as opposed to when teammates were reached for comment, 37%.

Coaches and teammates of the offending athlete did use the “deal” tactic in the same article more than any other tactic. This took place 21% of the time, four of the nineteen possible chances. Coaches and the offending athlete on the other hand spoke 21 times in the same article, and though they used the same crisis response strategy six total times, those instances were divided evenly amongst “silence” and “deal” (14% of the time for each). While other Lakers players offered consistent support for Bryant, Phil Jackson took the unique approach to addressing the media by attempting to downplaying Kobe’s case in light of all the other world issues (Beck, 2003g). The New York Mets players meanwhile only made statements saying there was no place for personal matters in the clubhouse. Generally refusing to comment, Santana only once took to “deny” the issue by saying, “the truth will come out,” (Smith, 2010).

As this evidence would suggest, crisis strategies were much more staggered when coach responses were compared to that of the accused athlete in the same article. “Silence” was the most popular strategy used by athletes when a coach’s statement was present, used 48% of the time any coach response was given. Steelers head coach Mike
Tomlin expressed his concern for Roethlisberger and the potential damage Steelers’ reputation in a 30-minute press conference at an off-season league meeting. While Tomlin praised Roethlisberger for being a great competitor, he and the team would follow the steps of the organization and wait on the situation to play itself out before making any decisions (Bouchette, 2010e). These statements made by Tomlin came in an article where Roethlisberger did not comment. Tomlin would later institute a “zero tolerance policy” in regards to off-the-field misconduct (Bouchette, 2010f).

When no coach crisis response was present, athletes used “deny,” 44%, or “deal,” 36% of the time. “Silence” was used only 9% of the time by athletes when coaches were not present in the same article. Coaches used the “deal” strategy when no athlete statement was present 65% of the time. All of the relationships mentioned from this crosstab were significant.

**Offending Athlete Response/Lawyer & Agent Response/Commissioner Response**

**Crosstab**

The accused athlete and their legal representatives commented on the case in the same article fifteen times. In those cases, each group used the “deny” method nine times, or 60% of the time. This was the most of any common strategy in the same article. Ben Roethlisberger’s agent Ryan Tollner aggressively came out and said his team was skeptical of the accusations. Attorney Pamela Mackey did the same for Kobe Bryant. During Bryant’s first media contact at his press conference, Rachel Uranga (2003) of the LA Daily News stated that Kobe took the “victim role” because he was falsely accused. His lawyers implied that he would benefit from years of a healthy reputation and
relationship with the media. Athletes spoke to the media far more frequently in articles where the legal team did not comment. There were 70 responses made by athletes when the legal team was not present.

League commissioners heavily “deal” with the sexual assault accusations of their star athletes, in spite of any presence of the offending athlete; 85% of the time when the athlete’s response was present, 86% when it was not. The only approaches used by athletes when their league commissioner spoke in the same article were “silence” and “deal,” yet when a commissioner’s statement wasn’t present, the accused athlete typically used the “deny” strategy (43%). Despite this fact, “deal” was the tactic used most often by both the athletes and the commissioners when appearing in the same article. This figure slightly more than half the overall combined total.

Front Office Response/Team (Coach, Teammate & Offending Athlete) Response

Crosstab

Several significant relationships existed within this particular crosstab analysis. The team front office and the coaches and teammates spoke in the same article fourteen and fifteen times respectively with “deal” being the most popular method used. While coaches used this method a similar number of times regardless of the presence of the front office, teammates used “deal” just over 2/3 of the time when the front office was not available. However from a percentage standpoint, a greater discrepancy exists between coach response strategies (when front office statement is present and not present) than teammate response strategies. There was seldom usage of the same tactic in the same article by coaches and the front office. Only “deal” and “silence,” three and two
respectively, showed a congruent pattern of PR responses. Teammates and the front office used the same “deal” method in the same article seven times. Teammates also used “deal” quite often when the front office PR response was not present, however when no teammate response was present, the front office used “deal” and “silence” at a near equal rate.

When the front office was present, athletes only commented in 24% of the those articles. In those instances, “deal” was the most popular strategy, though not by a wide margin. When the front office was not present, “deny” was easily the most frequently used strategy by the accused athlete. Art Rooney first took questions on Roethlisberger over a month after the incident was first reported. In this press conference reported by Ed Bouchette of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (2010d), he “dealt” with the situation by saying:

The Steelers franchise and Mr. Roethlisberger in particular have taken image ‘hits' over the incident...but an image is built over a long period of time. And I certainly think that there's a lot of good will left in the Steelers' image…Look, it's a situation that he's going to have to work hard through all of this to rehabilitate his image. There's no question that it's taken a hit and we've told him it's going to be a long journey back and he's going to have to be up to meeting the challenge (p. A-1).

When accused athletes made statements, and no front office statement was present, “deny” was used the most (28 times), followed by “deal” (18 times), and “silence” (10 times). When reversed and with no athlete response, “silence” and “deal” were used evenly by the front office. With five responses and four responses for “deal” and “silence,” there was some consistency between these two groups within the same article. Early on though, Lakers general manager Mitch Kupchak came right saying the team supported Bryant while also saying, “We will wait for judicial process to answer
(questions).” This happened to be in the same article in which Kobe Bryant denied assaulting the hotel employee (Modesti, 2003).

League Office & Commissioner/Organizational PR Responses Crosstab

The offices of each league commented in a combined sixteen articles. Of those articles, there were six, seven and eight statements made by PR departments, owners and front offices respectively. Across each organizational group, there were fairly even response totals amongst the “deal,” “silence” and “cannot tell” methods. Yet, there were no more than two identical tactics used by the league office and any of the organizational groups in a given article.

Looking at the commissioner’s comments the same way, 41 articles contained comments by the heads of these major sports. Of those 41 articles, PR departments, owners and front offices had seven, sixteen and seventeen stories that also contained comments from those groups. When a commissioner statement is not present in an article, owners are much more likely to use “silence,” in addition to “deal,” whereas when a commissioner statement is present, owners tend only to “deal” with the crisis. In one article from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Rooney said the team was taking a “wait and see” approach and left any decision on quarterback roster moves up to Kevin Colbert, the director of football operations. In the same article, Commissioner Goodell released the following statement: "First, I think the most important thing is we take the issue very seriously…We are concerned that Ben continues to put himself in this position. I have spoken to the Steelers. I have spoken to Art Rooney directly about it. And at the appropriate time I will be meeting with Ben.” An open line of communication existed
between Roger Goodell, and Art Rooney. One also existed between Roethlisberger and the NFL Players Association.

Roethlisberger was found in direct violation of the NFL personal conduct policy. The policy states, “discipline is appropriate for conduct that undermines or puts at risk the integrity and reputation of the NFL, NFL clubs, or NFL players. By any measure, your conduct satisfies that standard,” (Silver, 2010b). Ultimately, Goodell would suspend Roethlisberger without pay for the first six games of the season, with an opportunity for it to be reduced to four games if Roethlisberger shows improvement based in Goodell’s opinion. He was not allowed to participate in team activities, and also had to complete mandated psychiatric counseling and treatment. Said Goodell, “There is nothing about your conduct in Milledgeville that can remotely be described as admirable, responsible or consistent with either the values of the league or the expectations of our fans.” In a letter forwarded to Roethlisberger, Goodell stated, “There is no question that the excessive consumption of alcohol that evening put the students and yourself at risk,” (Rex and Arnet, 2010).

As Major League Baseball commissioner Bud Selig stayed completely quiet on the subject Santana, NBA commissioner David Stern generally kept quiet on the issue of Kobe Bryant. Stern did take one opportunity to publicly admonish Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, who insinuated that the Bryant sexual assault allegation was actually good for the NBA and would increase national exposure for the league (Siler, 2003). The only comment from Selig’s office at all was a statement saying the Major League
Baseball’s department of investigation could meet with Santana (Red and Lucas, 2010). No follow-up to this claim was observed in this study.

The public relations departments and the front offices saw similar scenarios take place with “silence” seeing a drastic jump in usage when commissioner remarks were not present in an article. The PR departments, like the owners, saw the same amount of “deal” usage regardless of the commissioner’s presence. The front office still saw a high number of “dealing” with the crisis when the commissioner made a statement, however in that circumstance, “cannot tell” saw the same amount of usage.

There was a relatively high amount of common usage of the “deal” method by commissioners and both owners and the front office. Owners and commissioners saw this occurrence take place eight times in the same article, while front offices and commissioners saw seven instances. The owners and front office also both used “cannot tell” frequently when the commissioners attempted to “deal” with the issue. Despite symmetry and the statistical significance of all information reported from this crosstab, the breakdown of commissioner crisis response strategies and PR department strategies yielded different results. There was no duplicate usage of strategy observed by these two groups. The most frequently used method by the PR departments in this situation was “silence”; a commissioner crisis response was not present in any of those nine instances.
Chapter 6: Discussion

When analyzing the data from the crisis responses used in each athlete’s case, there are clearly some overarching themes that appear to connect with fan response. The usage of “silence” and “deal” when handling these crises were dominant throughout the study. While some groups provided rather ambiguous responses resulting in a “cannot tell” coding, most either took the approach of “dealing” with the crisis, usually by supporting the accused athlete or offering corrective action, or by not saying anything. This was especially true in the cases of Kobe Bryant and Ben Roethlisberger. Additionally, “denying” the crisis took place was something that only took place under certain circumstances.

Bryant, Roethlisberger and Santana all rejected their sexual assault accusations early and often. In fact, Bryant and Roethlisberger regularly allowed their legal teams (whether they be lawyers or agents) to speak to the media on their behalf during the first month of the crisis. The data suggests that typically when lawyers spoke, the athletes themselves declined to comment. Denying an event has taken place, even if an athlete is
telling the truth, is a bold response requiring lots of conviction. The data would presume that before taking a strong approach of this magnitude, accused athletes will either allow their attorneys to do it for them, or will wait until the setting is one conducive for such a position. This can manifest itself in the form of press conferences or one-on-one interviews with the athlete. This would explain why whenever an accused athlete elected to “deny” the crisis took place, there was little or no presence from the organization, the team or the league in the same article.

The organizations that employ these athletes on the other hand never took an aggressive stance like “denying” the incident happened. If the athletes took that stance, they did so on their own. The organizations also hardly ever said anything that gave the impression they were “diminishing” the crisis; the research supports this fact. Organizations have many constituencies that will hold them accountable in the event the hard line stance they take with their athlete contains negative consequences. The league, corporate sponsors, season ticket holders, coaches and other players can then call into question the ethical stance of management and ownership.

This would also explain why the leagues, commissioners, organizations, coaches and teammates of the accused athletes leaned on the “deal” and “silence” crisis response approaches. The research suggests that when multiple groups commented in the same article, “dealing” with the crisis superseded all other response strategies, including “silence.” It is also apparent that this mandate comes from the top down, particularly in the National Football League. Roger Goodell almost exclusively “dealt” with the Ben Roethlisberger situation. When a Goodell statement made its way into a story, other
response methods decreased, regardless of the group that was speaking. NFL spokesperson Greg Aiello also handled the Roethlisberger case by “dealing” with it in the majority of cases.

Organizations and teams often used the “deal” approach as well, though there was some variance between the three individual teams, allowing them to maintain some sense of identity from a public relations standpoint. Lakers general manager Mitch Kupchak addressed the media more than any other member of Lakers management; he usually took the approach to “deal” with the Bryant issue. Bryant was one of the biggest stars in the NBA, and the accusation came out days after the alleged encounter. However the New York Mets front office exclusively used “silence” in regards to Johan Santana. The Santana situation did not become public until nine months after it allegedly took place. The Mets organization therefore treated it as if it was a non-issue and did their best not to acknowledge it. Art Rooney, who serves as both part owner and Steelers team president, used a combination of “deal” and “silence,” while providing a few of vague responses as well. The Steelers PR department mostly opted not to say anything. With football being under national microscope for their discipline issues, it is reasonable for the Steelers to act more frequently, and with a larger variety of crisis responses.

Nevertheless, “dealing” with the crisis seemed to possess a gravitational effect on responses within the cases in this study. Though the various groups within the study may have previously used other strategies, when appearing in the same article as other groups, response became more conservative. Moreover, there was typically a higher likelihood that both parties would “deal” with the crisis if both took the same approach. This was
especially true when taking a closer look at the teammate’s response patterns. Teammates “dealt” with the situation in most scenarios by offering support for their troubled leader, and by praising his past acts of humanity and strong locker room presence. They also, along with the front office, both used the “deal” approach seven times in the same article. Furthermore, teammates and coaches were more likely to share the same method of response as opposed to coaches and the offending athlete. Teammates held a closer bond to the front office than did the coaches.

Individually, Johan Santana, Ben Roethlisberger and Kobe Bryant took different methods to replying to the media. Santana, like the entire Mets team and organization, avoided speaking about the issue and had no immediate comment (Ackert and Siemaszko, 2010). Santana told the media that his rape claim was a non-issue because it took place last year and “the case is closed…I’m done with that, no more comments,” without allowing any opportunity for follow-up questions (Ackert and Martino, 2010). As news of the case broke, the Mets organization treated it the same way by not attempting to get involved at all and calling it, “a personal matter,” (Red, Martino and Siemaszko, 2010).

Roethlisberger claimed he did not force himself on the woman, but largely “dealt” with the situation and showed extreme levels of contrition. Bryant meanwhile denied assaulting the hotel worker, but he did admit to committing adultery.

A major difference between the accusations of Bryant and Roethlisberger are the histories of each athlete. It is likely that Bryant and his team felt comfortable taking this approach in front of the media because he has never had problems of any kind with the
law, or with authority. Bryant’s public persona was built entirely on his exceptionally clean reputation. Because he was essentially a first-time offender, Bryant had the ability to be more aggressive in his style of handling the situation. Roethlisberger meanwhile, was bound to receive some negative backlash for being accused of the same crime for the second time in less than one year, in a league that has a problem with criminal behavior. Therefore, Roethlisberger, the Steelers, and the NFL displayed concern, remorse and mandated some sort of constructive rehabilitation, which explains the counseling Roethlisberger had to attend before his suspension was reduced. Also for this reason, along with the Steelers’ long-time perceived level of class, the Steelers organization responded to the crisis far more frequently than either the Mets or Lakers.

The Steelers certainly went out of the way to protect their image, as did Roethlisberger for his. This also was an extremely rational decision considering the importance of image to the Pittsburgh media and fans. The Pittsburgh Tribune Review and the Pittsburgh Post Gazette’s coverage of the Steelers team image dwarfed that of the Lakers and Mets. Roethlisberger’s image also received more references in the headline than did Bryant’s or Santana’s, and Roethlisberger narrowly edged Bryant in overall image references. The quarterback also led the three accused athletes in suggested public relations steps by a landslide. This would also explain why Roethlisberger saw newspaper coverage at a nearly identical rate in both papers, unlike his counterparts. It is clear that the Pittsburgh area was far more concerned about the perceived character of Roethlisberger and their football team. This was in spite of the fact that Kobe Bryant and Johan Santana were both married fathers who admitted to having extramarital affairs.
Bryant’s marriage was fairly public as his wife frequently attended Laker games, accompanied Bryant to the ESPY Awards, and was by Kobe’s side during his press conference to proclaim his innocence. Yet the Los Angeles newspapers did not cover the impact on Bryant’s image with the same frequency as the Pittsburgh publications did with Roethlisberger. Santana, like Bryant, received a higher percentage of personal life references, however this did not translate into overall image references. In fact, only the New York Daily News mentioned Santana’s image (headline or article), personal life, or the Mets image. The New York Times made no reference to any of this, thus lowering Santana’s totals in each of these categories. Kobe Bryant’s sizable increase from team image coverage to individual image coverage perhaps gives credence to the notion of the NBA being a league focused on the stars whereas the NFL is focused on the team.

The timing of the analyzed articles proved to be a critical asset to the research. There was a slight decline in overall newspaper coverage after the first month of the incident. This is to be expected to a degree, however there was a noticeable increase in responses from owners, coaches, teammates, commissioners and the accused athletes. These individuals may be extremely recognizable and possess high levels of influence. The remarks made by Phil Jackson, Art Rooney, Bud Selig, Shaquille O’Neal and Mike Tomlin could reverberate throughout the sports world, and go a long way to shape the opinions of the accused athlete’s and their case. It is clear that these individuals would rather wait and see how things play out before making a definitive statement. During the incident, commentary was dominated only by the athlete’s legal team. Since the attorneys
and agents are only directly linked to the athlete only, any public relations miscalculation should not impact the organization or the league.

Another divide exists within the usage of response strategies. Because the aforementioned lawyers speak heavily in the early stages of a sexual assault crisis, there could be (and was in this particular study) elevated amounts of “denial.” There was also consistently a higher usage of “silence” during the incident from all three organizational groups, and to a lesser extent the league offices. As time progressed beyond the first month and other divisions of people were reached for comment, many more began to “deal” with the situation. “Dealing” with the crisis takes on some ownership of the problem and recognizes the need of an explanation of some kind. People have had ample time to digest the accusation and it shows a willingness to begin the healing process with their publics. It is evident most are not ready to make this leap until after at least 30 days.

Fan feedback also increased after the incident. Additionally, fans tended to be more negative during the incident, but eventually warmed up to the accused athlete after the incident. This could be a simple case of “time healing all wounds,” and fans either forgetting or becoming less concerned with the transgressions of their star athletes as time goes on, or it can be a result of shrewd public relations over a period of weeks. The research would suggest that the latter is very likely when looking closer at the fan feedback for the specific athletes.

Kobe Bryant managed to obtain the most positive fan feedback. While Ben Roethlisberger received mixed fan remarks, Johan Santana collected the most negative feedback. Roethlisberger’s situation was unique in the sense that he previously had
multiple public relations gaffes in the past, yet he played for a well-respected organization. He was also a single man, unlike his peers. Santana and Bryant were in similar stages of life and played for organizations that are quiet compared to the Steelers. As soon as the legal aspects allowed for it, Bryant acknowledged his mistake, and spoke to the media directly and from the heart. Santana, whose lawyers were never involved in his response process, resisted talking about his accusation as much as he could. He also never acknowledged his affair to the media, only to a sheriff’s investigator while under oath. One man faced his situation head-on and readily admitted his mistakes; that same man garnered the most positive feedback from fans. It is also interesting to note that Roethlisberger, the man who (along with his team) used the most varied for forms of crisis response, also had the most diverse levels of fan feedback.

**Limitations to the Study**

The research that has been examined is a content analysis of three specific cases consisting of three specific sets of circumstances. The most obvious limitation to the study is the lack of generalizability. With sports, as in business, not every crisis is going to be the same. The information learned from these sexual assault cases will not necessarily crossover to all types of crises in sports. This shortcoming though, does not impact the validity of the study.

Another limitation of the study lies within the statistical balance of the data. While the Bryant and Roethlisberger cases provided a near equal number of stories, the Johan Santana case accounted for only 8% of the total number of articles. Despite scanning newspapers for the same span of time, (up to six months after the initial
reporting of the incident), the New York Times and the New York Daily news simply did not cover the Santana case with the same intensity. This resulted in the statistics in some categories being skewed and or not relevant.

The Kobe Bryant case took place seven years prior to the Santana and Roethlisberger accusations, both of which occurred in 2010. Therefore, the social media questions were basically not applicable for him; it ironically did not have any place in the study whatsoever as neither Santana nor Roethlisberger used social media at any point.

There were other variables that could have impacted many questions. With regards to fan feedback, other external factors could have played into Kobe Bryant having the most positive feedback. For instance, Bryant had already been with the Lakers for eight years at the time the story broke (longest tenure of the three athletes). The Lakers were also the only team he had ever played with. Bryant also won three NBA championships with the Lakers before his affair in July 2003. While Roethlisberger had won two Super Bowls for the Steelers, he did not have a clean slate before this accusation. Santana meanwhile was clean beforehand, but had never won a World Series and was playing in just his third season in New York as a member of the Mets. It is possible that the success and service an athlete has with a particular team can impact the opinions of fans. Perhaps Santana would have received more encouraging feedback from fans had his episode taken place while he was with the Minnesota Twins, the team he broke into the Major Leagues with and where he won two Cy Young Awards.

The timing when each story broke was also an uncontrolled variable. While all the alleged sexual assaults took place during each athlete’s off-season, only Santana’s was
not immediately reported. Santana’s accusation being deferred caused the news to break during the season, a factor that Bryant and the Lakers and Roethlisberger and the Steelers did not have to endure. This could have entered into the Mets, and Major League Baseball’s decision to basically ignore the incident. Whether right or wrong, the season acted as a diversion, which allowed them to circumvent Santana’s issue to some extent.

For future researchers looking to replicate this study or a similar one, it may be beneficial to compare how two teams within the same sport handle multiple public relations issues affecting their athletes, then gauging feedback within those fan bases over time. When selecting the teams, one may hold a perception of being a classy organization, while the other may be looked upon as less than reputable. By analyzing articles from many types of athlete issues, one can see if an organization possesses a specific pattern of public relations response. Then the research can detect whether or not and or to what extent these patterns had on fan perceptions. Another option would be to examine three cases where the circumstances are more alike, or to reproduce this same study using a different type of professional athlete crisis.

Research Question Analysis

Considering the information acquired through this study, some important resolutions can be found when revisiting the research questions. When answering the first question regarding any specific type of public relations course of action following a sexual assault allegation, it is apparent that there is no exact method in which all leagues and teams subscribe. Public relations are a unique discipline, as it is extremely conditional with respects to the organization’s surroundings. Each league has a different agenda, as
does each team, city and athlete; this fact was reflected in the research, therefore it is difficult to classify results found in this study as “best practices.” However, a practitioner can begin to formulate a crisis communication plan for addressing a sexual assault claim based on these results and what was found to be effective.

Maintaining a certain level control of the is vital for public relations practitioners at all times. While this can be accomplished in many ways, the easiest way is to use language that will not implicate or constrain the team or the athlete. When a crisis first occurs, it is best for the team to respond vaguely early on, or to not go public with any comments at all. By making a powerful statement regarding the athlete’s involvement before all the facts are in, teams are sacrificing control of the story and are allowing themselves no room for clarification if things go wrong. The Steelers PR department did exactly that when initially addressing the Roethlisberger issue. They said they were aware of the investigation and that they were gathering facts and there would be no further comment at that time.

If a statement is released in any form, it should be made by the team president, general manager or the public relations department. Although owners can be the one to deliver the statement, refraining from being the face of the organization’s initial response does not appear to harm the team’s perception. The safer approach is to allow one of the other members to address the media once being briefed on all the information presently at their disposal. The research has shown that, contrary to previous beliefs, when used in moderation (like with the Bryant and Roethlisberger cases), being silent on an athlete’s situation will not hurt the overall perception of the team or the player. Under these
particular circumstances, silence should not have a completely negative connotation, as it did not appear to harm Bryant or Roethlisberger. Allow the athlete or their legal representation to make any statement solidifying a firm position. The organization should avoid confirming or denying the situation happened, and should instruct coaches and teammates to respond in the same fashion, if at all.

From there, organizations should continue to gather facts from police, and the athlete directly. As soon as legally allowed, the media should be formally addressed. The team is not obligated to associate itself with the troubled athlete in this setting. For example, Roethlisberger addressed the media with Art Rooney and Mike Tomlin by his side after his first sexual assault accusation with a Steelers logo covered backdrop behind him, yet he found himself delivering his second sexual assault press conference alone in front of his locker. Roethlisberger was not even allowed near the Steelers practice facility/headquarters for weeks after the incident; so long in fact that Ron Cook (2010) of the Pittsburgh Post Gazette claimed he was away for too long and needed to rejoin his teammates.

Kobe Bryant spoke to the media at his press conference for less than ten minutes in front of a black background that featured no Lakers or corporate logos. No Laker representatives were by his side, only his legal representation and his wife as he spoke from the heart, without notes. The organization can elect to stand beside the athlete when first addressing the public, however it makes more sense to play it safe and to avoid guilt by association. The athlete does not have to take questions when making initial contact with the media, but this decision can be left up to the athlete and his or her legal team.
Behind the scenes, upper-level management should continue to meet with the athlete to discuss preventative actions in the future, and how to navigate the media firestorm. Despite being “furious,” Art Rooney met with Roethlisberger several times to instill in him what it would take for him not to put himself in this position again. Rooney told Roethlisberger that he would have to work extremely hard to win the fans over once again, as he had betrayed their trust (Bouchette, 2010c). Bryant had a conversation with Lakers head coach Phil Jackson to discuss media relations policies. This internal communication was not limited only to Bryant, as Jackson had the same conversation with the rest of his Laker teammates (Beck, 2003e).

Over time, the team’s general manager and or PR department should begin to deal with the situation if the athlete was in fact guilty of any wrongdoing (not necessarily a crime). Owners have the option of addressing the situation publically, although this may be heavily dependent on the whether the owner is customarily visible. It would behoove organizations to monitor how the commissioner and the league is addressing this particular case, and all major disciplinary issues league-wide. Chances are, the league is taking a safe approach, and since the team is already dealing with the issue, ownership should do the same if compelled to speak.

Coaches and teammates should follow the same edict of not making any controversial statements regarding the sexual assault case. This type of crisis is an extremely sensitive matter, as it can potentially alienate female fans, and confound children.
When the time comes to infuse the accused athlete back into the locker room and or when practices and games begin, public relations departments must control the media. This could mean being judicious with media credentials, eliminating the media’s ability to ask questions regarding the crisis or setting up specific guidelines for media access ahead of time. When Ben finally returned to practice, he did not speak to on his first day. In subsequent days, he did speak to the media after practice; first with a two minute session while only taking two questions, then progressing from there. He was accompanied by Steelers PR director Burt Lauten the entire time (Bouchette, 2010b). If members of the press do not abide by these guidelines, their access should be revoked immediately. The Lakers went to great lengths to protect Kobe Bryant once he returned to the team for media day. PR director John Black was not only present at interviews, but he took action by stepping in when questions became out of line and confiscated that media member’s credentials after providing the media with specific guidelines on what questions they were able to ask (Beck, 2003b) (Beck, 2003f). Bryant was also draped by three members of a “security team,” who limited access to the superstar during these interviews, and even more security guards were stationed inside and outside the Lakers Hawaiian training camp facility (Beck 2003g). Phil Jackson, in another instance of controlling the media access, canceled the morning shootaround the day of Bryant’s first game back in Colorado since the accusation in an attempt to cease the media hysteria surrounding his shooting guard (Beck, 2004).

Further public relations steps can be taken by the athlete that involves the team and organization. The organization should grant the athlete opportunities to speak with
the media (in a one-on-one interview for example) if the athlete feels so inclined. The organization should brief the athlete on their position before going on camera so the athlete does not violently contradict or incriminate the team. The research indicates that when the athlete is accused, but not convicted of sexual assault, fans will continue to support the team and the athlete in the future. It is imperative that the teams and organizations properly handle these circumstances.

Fans are the lifeblood of the professional sports industry. They will not hesitate to express their feelings on an athlete or team through calling into radio shows, writing replies to newspaper articles or by booing at games. This content analysis confirms that there is a connection between the methods whereby organizations handle sexual assault cases, and the reaction from the team’s fans. The team name was mentioned in nearly every article that applied to this study; the connection of these incidents to the teams cannot be overstated. As one fan from a Pittsburgh Post Gazette article remarked, “I would rather have a losing team, with good character guys, than winners with a questionable image,” (Perles, 2010). Of course not all fans share this sentiment, but it embodies the value of brand equity and image management that is shared by fans of professional sports all over the country.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, crime has become a part of the professional sports scenery. Far too often athletes have made mistakes that have put management, coaches and teammates in difficult positions. When stars the caliber of Johan Santana, Ben Roethlisberger and Kobe Bryant are involved, it can shake an entire league to its core. These situations must
continuously be managed properly by all parties involved through timely remarks and thorough internal communication. Professional athletes can be tremendously influential, and if nothing else, teams have made large investments in these individuals. The relevance of the professional athlete’s responsibility to society can be debated. What cannot be questioned is understanding of the athlete’s connection to fans on a national, and sometimes worldwide scale. Athletes represent a team that represents a city; it appears people do not want to be represented by criminals, or those engaging in unsavory behavior.

The information learned from this study obviously cannot reduce unethical behavior or the allegation of such behavior. Perhaps other athletes will learn from these cases to be more cautious about who they associate with and what choices they make off the field. Ultimately, it is the athlete that will have to live with those consequences, whatever they may be, and they must find a way to cope with the public’s perception is of their character. Public relations practitioners in sports can only manage these situations for so long before long-term ramifications begin to arise. Maybe this analysis can aid practitioners and inspire others to delve further into this subject. Athletes and teams can hope that this material is seldom put into practice for the sake of managing their brand and image.
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Appendix 1

Falling Stars Codebook

1) SOURCE OF ARTICLE?
   1. Los Angeles Times
   2. Los Angeles Daily News
   3. Pittsburgh Post Gazette
   4. Pittsburgh Tribune Review
   5. New York Times

2) ATHLETE’S NAME?
   1. Kobe Bryant
   2. Ben Roethlisberger
   3. Johan Santana

3) SPORT?
   1. Basketball
   2. Football
   3. Baseball

4) WAS THE ARTICLE WRITTEN DURING (WITHIN THE FIRST THIRTY DAYS OF THE INITIAL REPORTING OF THE ACCUSATION) OR AFTER (WITHIN SIX MONTHS) THE INCIDENT?
   1. During
   2. After
5) IN THE ARTICLE, IS THERE A STATISTICAL BREAKDOWN OF SEXUAL ASSAULT CRIMES BY RACE?
   1. Yes
   2. No

6) DOES THE ARTICLE’S HEADLINE REFER TO THE IMAGE/REPUTATION OF THE ATHLETE?
   1. Yes
   2. No

7) DOES THE ARTICLE’S HEADLINE REFER TO THE IMAGE/REPUTATION OF THE TEAM?
   1. Yes
   2. No

8) DOES THE ARTICLE SPECIFICALLY REFERENCE AN IMPACT ON ATHLETE’S IMAGE/REPUTATION, CHARACTER OR MARKETABILITY?
   1. Yes
   2. No

9) DOES THE ARTICLE REFERENCE THE ATHLETE’S FAMILY OR PERSONAL LIFE?
   1. Yes
   2. No

10) DOES THE ARTICLE SUGGEST A PR POSITION THE ATHLETE SHOULD TAKE?
1. Yes
2. No

11) DOES THE ARTICLE SUGGEST ANY INPENDING FINANCIAL LOSS FOR THE TEAM (VIA TICKET SALES, MERCHANDISE, TEAM VALUE ETC.)?

1. Yes
2. No

12) DOES THE ARTICLE INCLUDE COMMENTARY OR QUOTES FROM FANS (IN THE CITY OF THE TEAM THAT THE ACCUSED ATHLETE PLAYS FOR)?

1. Yes
2. No

13) WERE THE FAN COMMENTS POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?

1. Positive
2. Negative
3. Both
4. Indifferent
5. No Fan Comments

14) IS A STATEMENT, PRESS RELEASE OR REMARKS FROM THE ORGANIZATION PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?

1. Yes
2. No

15) ARE REMARKS FROM THE OWNER PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?

1. Yes
2. No
16) IF REMARKS WERE MADE, WHAT CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY WAS USED?

1. Deny
2. Diminish
3. Deal
4. Silence
5. Cannot tell
6. N/A- No statement was made by this person/group

17) ARE REMARKS FROM THE TEAM’S PR DEPARTMENT PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?

1. Yes
2. No

18) IF REMARKS WERE MADE, WHAT CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY WAS USED?

1. Deny
2. Diminish
3. Deal
4. Silence
5. Cannot tell
6. N/A- No statement was made by this person/group

19) ARE REMARKS FROM THE TEAM’S FRONT OFFICE? (PRESIDENT, GM, DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS ETC.) PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?

1. Yes
2. No

20) IF REMARKS WERE MADE, WHAT CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY WAS USED?
   1. Deny
   2. Diminish
   3. Deal
   4. Silence
   5. Cannot tell
   6. N/A - No statement was made by this person/group

21) ARE REMARKS FROM COACHES ON THE TEAM PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?
   1. Yes
   2. No

22) IF REMARKS WERE MADE, WHAT CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY WAS USED?
   1. Deny
   2. Diminish
   3. Deal
   4. Silence
   5. Cannot tell
   6. N/A - No statement was made by this person/group

23) ARE REMARKS FROM THE ATHLETE’S TEAMMATES PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?
   1. Yes
2. No

24) IF REMARKS WERE MADE, WHAT CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY WAS USED?
   1. Deny
   2. Diminish
   3. Deal
   4. Silence
   5. Cannot tell
   6. N/A- No statement was made by this person/group

25) ARE REMARKS FROM THE OFFENDING ATHLETE PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?
   1. Yes
   2. No

26) IF REMARKS WERE MADE, WHAT CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY WAS USED?
   1. Deny
   2. Diminish
   3. Deal
   4. Silence
   5. Cannot tell
   6. N/A- No statement was made by this person/group
27) ARE REMARKS FROM THE OFFENDING ATHLETE’S PERSONAL PR REPRESENTATION/AGENT/ATTORNEY PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?

1. Yes
2. No

28) IF REMARKS WERE MADE, WHAT CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY WAS USED?

1. Deny
2. Diminish
3. Deal
4. Silence
5. Cannot tell
6. N/A- No statement was made by this person/group

29) ARE REMARKS FROM TEAM’S ATTORNEY PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?

1. Yes
2. No

30) IF REMARKS WERE MADE, WHAT CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY WAS USED?

1. Deny
2. Diminish
3. Deal
4. Silence
5. Cannot tell
6. N/A- No statement was made by this person/group
31) IS THERE A STATEMENT OR PRESS RELEASE FROM THE LEAGUE PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?

1. Yes
2. No

32) IF REMARKS WERE MADE, WHAT CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY WAS USED?

1. Deny
2. Diminish
3. Deal
4. Silence
5. Cannot tell
6. N/A- No statement was made by this person/group

33) IS A STATEMENT MADE BY THE COMMISSIONER PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE?

1. Yes
2. No

34) IF REMARKS WERE MADE, WHAT CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY WAS USED?

1. Deny
2. Diminish
3. Deal
4. Silence
5. Cannot tell
6. N/A- No statement was made by this person/group
35) WAS THE TEAM NAME MENTIONED IN ARTICLE?
   1. Yes
   2. No

36) CONTACT INFO FOR TEAM MADE AVAILABLE?
   1. Yes
   2. No

37) DID THE ATHLETE DIRECTLY COMMUNICATE TO PUBLIC THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA REGARDING INCIDENT? (PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE)
   1. Yes
   2. No

38) DID THE TEAM DIRECTLY COMMUNICATE TO PUBLIC THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA REGARDING INCIDENT? (PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE)
   1. Yes
   2. No

39) DID THE LEAGUE DIRECTLY COMMUNICATE TO PUBLIC THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA REGARDING INCIDENT? (PRESENT IN THE ARTICLE)
   1. Yes
   2. No